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A3 Sophomore Honors English

March 24, 2015

Human Desperation

I was just a seventeen-year-old English lass with a generally dangerous taste for adventure in the eventful year of 1912. I had felt trapped at the farm, as though the mediocrity of everyday farm life was constricting my eagerness to fly past the bars of boredom. My father had asked the local general store shopkeeper to send word if he found any job advertisements in the city for a young girl like me. A couple of weeks later, my father returned home with news that a perfect job was available right in the center of London! I couldn’t believe my good fortune. The man hiring me was a wealthy business owner and needed a young maid who could care for his daughter. Although I was not particularly fond of the position, I was certainly ecstatic about going into the city and becoming independent. Breaking free from the cage of farm life and heading into a city full of innovation, ambitious entrepreneurs, and endless excitement was no longer a dream, but a reality.

Not long afterwards, the day finally arrived for me to leave my quaint little hometown and father, who tried to hide his tears with a kind, doleful smile.

“I can’t believe how much you’ve grown, Mary,” stated my father, clutching my hand tightly just as I was preparing to head into the train. “Your mother would have been so proud of you. Make sure to send word back home every once in a while, alright?” He finally released my hand from his unrelenting grip and pulled me into a warm embrace.

“I will, Father. Make sure you take care of yourself while I’m gone, okay? Don’t forget to write me back, too.”

Gently prying myself from my father’s tight embrace, I dashed onto the crowded train just as the conductor gave the last shrill warning whistle announcing the train’s departure. Climbing aboard and selecting a door relatively close to the exit, I placed my luggage on the shelf above my seat and opened my window. I waved and blew kisses to my father as the train left the dilapidated station, gradually picking up the pace and speeding away from my hometown and former life.

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It was absolutely incredible. An overwhelming cacophony of various sounds reverberated against the tiled walls of the massive train station as late businessmen and slightly frazzled housewives crowded the walkways in a mad scramble to get on and off various trains. The hiss and squeaks of brakes, warning whistles of departing trains, and the voice of a monotone woman announcing arrival and departure times echoed in my ears. I felt as though I was baby chick, exposed to the brilliant clashing colors of the world for the first time after opening its eyes.

A large, intimidating man stood close to the exit holding up a sign with my name, “Mary Troye,” written neatly across its surface. Relieved to have a native guide, I hurried towards him, keeping one eye on him and the other on the fascinating surrounding chaos of London’s main train station.

I considered asking for his name, but after a glance at his serious expression and towering height, I somehow ended up silent the entire car ride despite my normally garrulous personality. As he drove me towards my new employer, Mr. Elliott’s, home, I watched bustling city streets fade to apartment complexes and residential buildings. We finally reached a large mansion, sitting on a street composed of grand, opulent estates. Stepping out of the car, the colossal giant-of-a-man led me to the side of the house, where a small servant’s door was located. A rich aroma of roasted pig and various herbs filled the air around us. After knocking on the door with his knuckles once, he turned abruptly and left, leaving me to face the uncertainties and adventures thatlied beyond that innocent, plain white door.

A rather rotund middle-aged woman opened the door, steel grey hair pulled into a tight no-nonsense bun.

“Are you the new girl?” She asked quickly, staring me down with a stern expression.

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll be working-” I was cut off before I could finish my sentence.

“Alright, come on in then. I’ve got a lot of work to do and very little time to do it in. Master Elliott is expecting you.” She turned after releasing a huff of annoyance and strode towards what appeared to be an expansive kitchen of bustling activity, sweeping past and scattering the frantic kitchen workers as though disturbing a procession of hard-working ants. I hurried after her; afraid of getting lost along the endless winding hallways and confusing layout of nearly-identical suites. We finally arrived at a set of towering solid oak doors leading to an office study. I waited anxiously before the doors that would also lead to my first job.

“Sir, the young lass from Framlingham is here.”

“Go ahead and let her in, Susan,” a low gruff voice replied from the other side of the door. Scowling, “Susan” pulled open the door and bowed respectfully to the middle-aged man on the other side. She then sped towards her next destination, mumbling “not a tour guide... waste of time,” under her breath.

“Come in.” The man I assume is my new employer looked up from his papers, dressed in an expensive, professionally-fitted suit and recently polished leather brown shoes. “I’m so glad to see you, Miss Troye.” He put down the stack of papers in his hands and folded his fingers together atop his grand oak desk. Turning, he beckoned a pretty girl about my age over and stated, “This is my daughter, Alice.”

As I considered the girl that I was hired to serve dutifully, I noticed that she was not only stunning for her age with delicate pale blond lashes framing light blue eyes and lustrous honey blond hair that brought her creamy smooth skin, but she also held an annoying air of superiority. She was definitely the poster-child for an upper-class princess.

I probably looked ridiculous in comparison, with my wild curly brown hair and freckled, tanned skin. I had worn my best dress for this occasion, but I felt ashamed to be wearing such rags when compared to the fashionable pale blue loose-waisted dress in the so-called popular native-dress motif.

“From today onwards, your responsibility in this household will to be to attend her every need and serve as her personal attendant and maid.” Softening his tone, Mr. Elliott shifted slightly in his seat to address his daughter. “Alice, this is Mary Troye. Miss Troye will be your new attendant starting from today. Call Susan back to show Miss Troye the layout of the estate then head back to your lessons… Oh and Miss Troye? Alice and I will be boarding the Titanic on April 10th for New York. You will be accompanying us. That will be all.”

The two of us were abruptly dismissed while my head still spun from the news. I would apparently be boarding THE Titanic and heading to the United States.I had read in the papers the other day that White Star chairman, J. Bruce Ismay, had announced the completion of the Titanic’s construction and promised the utmost comfort for his guests in the new liner. What luxuries would be on that new ship? What new adventures would I be able to find there?

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An enormous crowd gathered at the shore. I had never seen anything like it. That day, Southampton’s port was as crowded as the most popular of England’s train stations. There were so many people I could hardly breathe, an overwhelming feeling of suffocation causing me to feel faint. The mammoth ship loomed far above the docks, a massive metal giant preparing to leave the shore of England on a daring journey across the seas. The day to board the Titanic had finally arrived, bringing with it a new sense of anticipation that I hadn’t felt since I had arrived in London a month ago.

“Hurry, girls. We have got to get on board now. Stop dawdling.” Mr. Elliott was growing impatient with our slow progress through the crowd gathered to see the ship off.

Passing the first-class tickets to the ticket man in front of the walkway up to the ship, we finally boarded the legendary British liner, the Titanic. Although its outside appearances didn’t appear to be too flashy from a distance, closer inspection revealed the highest grade of material was used in its construction, as well as creating a breathtaking interior. The interior design of the ship was phenomenal. It was outrageously lavish and luxurious. I have never been anywhere so opulent in my life. Stunning sparkling crystal chandeliers dangled from the ceilings, resembling the delicate dangling diamond earrings of a queen. Lush, richly-colored imported Persian and Egyptian carpets coated the polished wood floors and famous paintings and art masterpieces spotted the rooms and hallways intermittently, each individual piece worth a fortune. Even the facilities on the ship were first class. There was a first-class dining saloon, elevators, a gymnasium, and a gorgeous swimming pool. Even the third-class facilities and cabins were relatively comfortable, despite their simplicity.

However, the final touch was something else entirely. The crowning jewel of this splendid showcase was the guests themselves. The wealthiest guests strolled and glided across those carpets and seemed to shine like luminescent jewels; each adding a sense of elegance, wealth, and class that completed the atmosphere. Peerless gems of sapphires, rubies, emeralds, and diamonds glimmered innocently from elegant necks, while expensive dresses and suits adorned people. It was captivating.

Alice’s sharp calls brought me back to reality, but in truth, even the magical world of wealth before my eyes could not distract me from a deep seated sense of unease about this trip. I prayed to God that we would make it to New York City without any mishaps. Sighing in resignation, I focused my sights on catching up to Alice and shoved my curiosity and awe of the opulence and luxury around me deep down to keep from distracting me.

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Time passed quickly aboard the Titanic as we sailed calmly through various seas and passed several ports. Before I knew it, it was already April and we were passing Newfoundland, gradually approaching our final destination of one of America’s east coast cities; New York City. Throughout the trip, the weather had been unremarkable with mild temperatures and mostly rain-free skies. The water was unusually calm one night and glassy seas reflected the stars from the clear night sky. I was feeling slightly ill that night, so I slipped on a light jacket and headed up past the rest of the first-class suites onto the moonlit glossy deck for some fresh air. Later, I was considering going down to the lower levels of the ship, where the cheaper suites and kitchens were, to grab a late night snack. Then again, I also considered the fact that the cooks were probably asleep since it was already 11:40 pm. Resting my elbows on the ship railing, I gazed solemnly at the point where the glimmering stars seemed to fade away to be swallowed by the darkness of the sea. It was late, so no other guests were on deck at the time, leaving me to ponder deeply in the refreshing quiet of solitude.

Suddenly, the ship jolted as though struck by something, and strange sounds came from the bottom of the ship as I held onto the railing for dear life. I knew it. I knew something bad was going to happen when I first boarded the ship. Maybe that initial feeling of unease was formed from the proud declarations of an “unsinkable ship” by the arrogant crew members, or the fact that the hulking mass of steel and metal seemed to clearly lack the elegance required to float.

I wish I had listened to that initial sense of unease.

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As the ringing of piercing alarms and the voice of the captain began to echo across the ship, I stumbled back to my room in search of Alice and Mr. Elliott. Through the intercom, the captain seemed to be expressing the need for all guests to cooperate with crew members and security to fulfill an evacuation, attempting to placate the guests by stating that the ship was in no immediate real danger. He continued to emphasize the need for at least women and children to be evacuated to the lifeboats.

The ship shook a little under my feet, expressing its pain due to whatever unexpected injury it was enduring. Finally, I reached my door and set my hand on the shiny brass door knob just as Alice swung the door open from the inside. Then I saw it. In all my life, I had never seen anything so appalling. The expression on Alice's face was utterly shocking. It was a look of pure fear and paranoia; desperation. Alice, the spoiled upper-class princess, looked so desperate to find a way to survive our situation that I was sure I was seeing an entirely different person before me. Once glossy honey blonde hair seemed to be dull and tangled, while haunted fearful eyes scanned the hallway for the best route of escape. However, I also noticed that not many people were panicking the same way she was. Most of the guests who had opened their door to see what was going on seemed to express a surprising degree of frustration and irritation. For all his popularity with his wealthiest passengers, earning him his nickname, Millionaire’s Captain, many of those same passengers were growing increasingly annoyed with his actions.

“What is going on? This had better be worth waking me up at these ungodly hours,” stated one sour-looking woman.

“Dear god, will someone turn off those damn alarms already? I’ve had enough. Where’s the Captain?” An elderly gentleman shook his head in irritation as he stood in the doorway of his suite and glared at the members of the crew that were frantically running back and forth across the center hallway past his door. “Why must I wake up this late at night to participate in an evacuation if there isn’t any actual danger? Can’t it wait for the morning?”

I couldn’t believe it. Couldn’t these people see the desperation of our situation? I felt the ship tilt dangerously under my feet.

“Mary, take Alice and find a lifeboat. Now.”

Mr. Elliott’s expression was frightful in that moment. Although a generally serious, commanding man of power, Mr. Elliott gave off an unusually potent aura of authority that was almost overpowering. But that wasn’t what frightened me. It was the glimmer of fear in the depths of his eyes that allowed me to fully understand the urgency of our current predicament and struck a chord of chilling fear in me as well.

The Captain’s voice became increasingly frantic through the speakers and soon expressions of annoyance shifted to expressions of panic and concern.

“What about you, Mr. Elliott? Aren’t you coming with us?” I didn’t want to be left stranded in this disaster. I didn’t want to have to protect Alice all by myself.

I didn’t want to be left alone.

“I’ve got to take care of something beforehand.” His gaze softened a little. “Mary, bring Alice home safe for me. Please.” Hearing growing frantic voices outside our door, he glanced towards the hallway and turned back to me. “Find a lifeboat and live, Mary.” He shoved me out the door, before slamming it shut.

By this time, the lights had already gone out. People began shoving each other out of the way to get onto the deck and out into the lifeboats. Their faces were mostly concealed by the darkness of the night, only revealed briefly by the emergency lights flickering from inside the ship. Fleeting glimpses of terror-stricken faces flashed by the corners of my vision. Shots rang across the nights amid the frantic screams as officers attempted to control the throbbing mass of desperate people. As the Titanic sank further into the sea, even these futile attempts at civility were dropped and they too pushed aside the women and children they were protecting just a second ago. I hastily pulled the glassy-eyed, shaking Alice with me towards one of the last remaining life boats and managed to slip the two of us onboard by some miracle amid the chaos. Other women and a few men quickly clambered aboard and rowed out into the sea, away from the sinking giant and the pandemonium of the human struggle for survival. I noticed that many of the ladies on the lifeboat were wearing silk nightgowns and the gentlemen expensive wedding rings. As a result, I was sure that not many of the people from the lower cabins of the ship were able to make it onto the lifeboats, or at least this one.

I fervently hoped that Mr. Elliott would make it to safety, but for now, I’m glad I just managed to get away with Alice with our lives. Screams, remaining gunshots, and tortured sobbing filled my ears until those sounds echoed relentlessly in my mind as well.

As the lifeboat drifted farther and farther away from the sinking Titanic, I watched fathers and sons wave sadly to their departing loved ones. How could these people just leave behind the rest of the guests on board? What right did we have to just abandon them aboard a sinking disaster and certain death? In the distance, I watched as the great Titanic’s stern rose almost perpendicularly, causing the ship to sink deep below the sea’s dark surface.

I couldn’t afford to spend so much time thinking. My adrenaline began to fade away with the disappearance of the immediate threat and I was starting to really feel the cool night temperatures. Alice shook beside me, wet hair lying limp on her shivering back. We were both wet from the waves that had splashed water on our thin nightgowns.

“Mary?”

“Yes, Alice?”

“... Do you think my father will be alright?”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine, Alice. In fact, I bet he’ll show up with a rescue boat to take us home with a stern look on his face while scolding us about being late for dinner”

“You really think so?” She looked down at her pale, shaking hands. “Well, I suppose that would be nice… Thanks, Mary.”

“No problem. Just… Be prepared for the worst as well, okay? After this incident, there’s no telling what can still happen.” I couldn’t shake off the images of once-ethereal women and men like the beautiful Mrs. Jsador Strause, transformed into ordinary desperate human beings, searching for any escape from danger. But then, over the distant horizon, I noticed that there was hints of a dark shape. A ship! It was a glimmer of hope in this seemingly dark, depressing, and bleak future.

The ship seemed to be outlined by outlined by the lights of the heavens in my eyes, if only for a moment. I could now see a small sliver of hope of getting out of this disaster alive. Even though the ship was some ways away, my newfound enthusiasm could not be contained and I leaped up from my seat while screaming, “Over here! Here! We’re over here! Help!”

“Mary, what’s going on?” Alice’s worried tone brought me to my senses.

I grasped her small shoulders in my hands and shook her as I cheerfully declared, “Alice, another ship is approaching! We’re going to be saved!” I have no doubt that my eyes probably lit up until they glimmered with my excitement. I was elated. We were not doomed to follow the river Styx with the rest of the people who had been unfortunately abandoned; isolated on the sinking Titanic.

The ship steadily approached our little lifeboat, and sounds of tears, wailing, and sobs seemed to quiet as everyone waited for our savior to reach us. When the ship arrived, there was a mad scramble to climb the ladder that was dropped down. I kept Alice close as she clutched my arm in a tight grip. We finally managed to board the ship as concerned crew members wrapped warm blankets around our shoulders and placed steaming cups of tea in our hands. I was led to a small room with Alice where we both curled up in the corner and slept, exhausted from the traumatic events of the night.

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About a week had passed since the incident, Alice and I were staying at her summer home in New York, even though it was not quite summer yet. As I sat on a park bench in one of the parks in the city, I reviewed the recently-printed newspaper clutched in my hands.

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“Hey, Alice!”

“Yes, Mary?”

“You may want to have a look at today’s newspaper.”

“Why?”

“It has information on the Titanic.”

“Really?! Hand it over!” She ran out from the library and dashed towards me at full speed, equal parts hopeful and concerned. Alice scanned over the newspaper’s contents, checking all articles involving the Titanic’s sinking on April 14 and 15, 1912.

Among articles regarding the Titanic, there were several regarding theories on why it sank. Many of the theories revolved around an iceberg creating a gash in the ship large enough to allow a significant amount of water to breach the ship. Such a gash may have caused severe damage to the Titanic due to the use of faulty workmanship or substandard riveting. Another theory of the Titanic’s fall was that more than four compartments of the ship simply filled up, causing the ship to sink. One particularly interesting theory was that a “supermoon” was the cause of an abnormal number of icebergs in the area.

Some articles were focused on who was to blame. Some reporters claimed that the people who built the ship were to blame, namely the shipbuilders from Belfast, Northern Ireland. Harland and Wolff, the shipyard where the Titanic was built, was under heavy pressure. Any one of the more than 10,000 workers could have been the cause of the Titanic’s downfall. On the other hand, three men were under an almost equal amount of pressure; the White Star ship line chairman, J. Bruce Ismay, William Pirrie, the man in charge of the Harland and Wolff shipbuilding firm, and [Edward J. Smith](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1812502/Edward-J-Smith), the captain of the Titanic. According to the newspaper, some people believed that the fault lied with the wireless radio operators, Jack Phillips and Harold Bride, both of whom had neglected to report all [iceberg](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/281212/iceberg) warnings to the bridge of the Titanic.

Alice continued to scan through various articles, until she finally reached an article reporting the final estimations of number dead which was more than 1,500. The crew apparently had about 700 fatalities. On the other hand, the number deceased in the third class suites was approximately 710. I knew what she was truly looking for, but I couldn’t quite bring myself to confront her about it.

Her father’s absence from the house.

The night we came here after the incident, the house was empty save for a few servants who had recently arrived to prepare the house for our arrival. Alice spent almost an hour, frantically searching the property for any signs of her father’s arrival, but when I asked, the servants all reported that he had not yet arrived. After calming down a little, Alice decided to wait patiently at this house until he arrived, but he never did show up. Until now. At the bottom of the list of the identified dead bodies discovered after the incident, the name neither of us wanted to see was listed.

Mr. Henry Elliott.

His body was discovered dead on April 22, washed up on a beach some ways away after presumably floating on the sea on some of the Titanic’s debris. After reading that, Alice’s eyes widened in shock and then filled with salty tears.

If we had never boarded the Titanic on that fateful day, Mr. Elliott would have survived.

Alice would never have been forced to live without a father.

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I would have been able to continue living blissfully unaware of how easily social class, status, and even civility faded away before the power of humankind’s common desire for survival.

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* Framlingham is a small town in England

2. Dalby, Douglas. "Raising the Memory of the Titanic, and a City’s Role in Its

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* The Titanic was built in Belfast, Northern Ireland
* Harland and Wolff was the shipyard where the Titanic was built
* There were more than 10,000 workers who helped build the Titanic

3. Dodge, Washington. "San Francisco’s Assessor Tells Story of the Wreck of the

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* The captain of the Titanic initially announced that the ship wasn’t actually in any danger
* Although the ship was supposedly not in any immediate danger, the captain announced that women and children were to be evacuated to the lifeboats
* Officers shot at some passengers who appeared to be losing control in an attempt to maintain some order
* Many men (fathers and sons) remained on the Titanic as it sunk, waving from the deck to their loved ones

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* A native-dress motif was also very popular in the 1910s

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* Mrs. Jsador Strause was the wife of the owner of the Macy’s department store

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* The Titanic began its journey from Southampton, England
* Throughout the trip, the weather was unremarkable with mild temperatures and mostly rain-free skies
* The sea was also glassy
* An iceberg created a gash on the Titanic, leading to its downfall
* Some say that the Titanic sank due to faulty workmanship or substandard riveting
* Another theory as to why the Titanic sank was that a “supermoon” was the cause of an abnormal number of icebergs in the area

7. "The sinking." *Toronto Star* [Toronto, Ontario] 14 Apr. 2012: U3. *Infotrac*

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* The lights went out as the ship's electrical system failed while the Titanic was sinking
* Titanic’s stern rose to be almost perpendicular

8. "Sinking of the Titanic - off Newfoundland: 1912." *When Technology Fails*. Ed.

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* The Titanic was a British liner
* The Titanic had a gymnasium

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* The Titanic left England on April 10th
* J. Bruce Ismay was the chairman of the White Star Line, a company of ocean liners
* The Titanic had a first-class dining saloon and four elevators
* The third-class’ offerings, although modest, were still noted for their relative comfort.
* Final destination of the Titanic= New York City
* The captain of the Titanic was very popular with his wealthy passengers
* The captain of the Titanic’s nickname was “Millionaire’s Captain”
* Not many of the people from the lower cabins of the ship (third-class) were able to make it onto the lifeboats
* The Titanic began to sink on the night of April 14th
* William Pirrie was the man in charge of the Harland and Wolff shipbuilding firm
* [Edward J. Smith](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1812502/Edward-J-Smith) was the captain of the Titanic
* Jack Phillips and Harold Bride were wireless radio operators who neglected to report all [iceberg](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/281212/iceberg) warnings to the bridge of the Titanic
* The number of total fatalities was more than 1,500
* The crew apparently had about 700 fatalities
* The number of deceased passengers in the third class suites was approximately 710

10. "Women's Clothing." *The University of Vermont*. U of Vermont, n.d. Web. 10 Feb.

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* It was fashionable for women to wear loose-waisted clothing in the 1910s